



The Art of Compromise

Most artwork can adapt well to being framed a variety of ways. Individual taste always leads framers to one particular solution they feel is the best choice, but other options will enhance the art, too. When creating frame designs for display in your frame shop or gallery, you have the luxury of doing whatever you feel is best for the art. Your examples don't neces-

sarily have to fit a specific color scheme, style, or space, so you have an opportunity to create your ideal designs.

When framing for customers, however, your approach may need to be quite different. The art of compromise is important when

other people are involved because their taste and personal style may be very different from your own. There is a difference between selecting your favorite frame design for a piece of art and being able to objectively see other options that may work just as well but are simply not to your taste.

When creating custom frame designs, it is important to always try to maintain the integrity of the art. Equally important, or perhaps more important, is satisfying your customers. When you design using logic rather



The colors in this print are totally foreign to the room. Rather than using even more of those colors for the frame and matting or introducing colors from the room that aren't in the art, a neutral frame design helps the transition. You could suggest that the homeowner add a couple of blue pillows and switch to a blue candle on the table so the art would begin to relate better.

than emotion, you can usually arrive at a good solution that satisfies both needs.

Your job as a custom frame designer becomes more challenging when you are faced with a customer whose tastes are dramatically different from your own and who wants to place the framed piece in a room that is less than ideal for it. Many people unknowingly select art that is inappropriate for the space where they intend to display it. There is a saying, "Good art does not have to match the sofa." Although this is true, it is also a good idea to consider the surroundings if the art is destined for a specific room. Customers can purchase whatever art they find appealing, but you need to show them the benefits of being flexible about where it will hang rather than designating a particular wall for it.

In addition to purchasing art that may clash with colors in the decor, the style and size of the art that

There are numerous ways to frame any piece of art. Keep an open mind about helping your customers find the best possible look that suits their tastes and styles.

consumers purchase may not be ideal, either. So if a customer brings in a piece that isn't a good fit for the room where they want to use it, how do you proceed? There is no single answer. You have to weigh your ability to overcome the obstacles presented to you. There may be times when you have to tell your customers it simply will not work. At other times, you just work your design magic and create a solution without customers realizing there was a problem.

Some framers like to ask their customers what type of frame design they have in mind. That approach, however, opens the door for them to tell you something that is all wrong for their art. At that point you are either stuck using their ideas and selling custom frame designs you cannot be proud of or you have to figure out a way to tactfully tell them it is not a good choice and show something else. It's like having your doctor ask you what you have in mind and you saying that you think you need open heart surgery, then having him reply, "Great, I'll get it scheduled."

As an alternative to specifically asking your customers what type of frame design they want, consider asking a series of questions that help you understand their decor, which in turn gives you a glimpse of their personal taste and style. The common questions to ask are:

- What room will the art hang in?
- What is the color scheme of that room? Find out specifically which color is on the wall and other large fields of color nearby.
- What is the style of the room? Get specific. For example, contemporary can be anything from mid-century modern, now considered antique, to a sleek retro look of metal, glass, and leather from the 60s or 70s to a softer, earthier contemporary of wood tones and linen that is often seen today. You won't know if you don't ask.
- Are there other pieces of framed art in the room? If so, how are they framed?
- What is the overall size of the room?
- What is the size of the wall where the art will hang? Get ceiling height, too.

If you want to know more, ask. Other questions could be about windows, light from lamps, the scale of the furnishings, etc. Listen carefully to every answer your customers give and come up with a game plan. In other words, develop the perfect frame design for the situation.

Think carefully about how to present your design concepts to your customers. First of all, make it all about them. Explain how you are showing each component because it addresses their taste, their style, their colors, and



This print shows colonial buildings in New England. To help the art fit into this contemporary space, a sleek frame design was used. Although it may not be the first choice, it relates to the sharp lines in the art and helps the art and room work together.

their space. Think about what is motivating them to have the piece framed. Try to work that into your presentation, too. Why wouldn't someone want your design if they hear the answer they asked for?

And don't forget that there will be times when you have to compromise in terms of color, style, or scale. Sometimes you may have to compromise on all three.

Challenge 1:

The Colors of the Art Don't Relate to the Room

As mentioned, the art does not have to match the room. However, you want it to look good in that space. If the colors of the art do not relate to the room, you won't be doing any favors to the art or the room to impose the colors from one onto the other. For example, if the art is red and blue and the room is green and yellow, a red and blue mat and frame combination is just adding more of the foreign color to the space. If you use a green and yellow mat and frame combination, it won't have any relationship to the art.

If the art colors are at the point of looking ridiculous or offensive, you as the professional have to choose whether you can have a conversation with the customer about possibly choosing a different piece of art or suggesting that this piece be hung somewhere else where it may work better with the surroundings. If your customer insists on this piece of art in the original room, it's time to compromise.

The Compromise

In situations where there is color conflict, the alternative is



This is a print that may typically be matted. In order to use a mat that's proportional to the size of the art, the overall size would be too large for the space. To control the outer dimension, a stacked moulding combination was used as if the print were a painting, eliminating the need for the mat.

to go neutral. Neutral designs are safe, but safe does not always lead to the most interesting of designs. In this case, however, it is smart to surrender a bit of drama to avoid the use of clashing colors.

Challenge 2

The Art Is the Wrong Style for the Room

The same idea that applies to color not matching a room can also be applied to style. There are some styles that work better together than others. For example, abstract art can look great in a traditional room and African art can look good in a contemporary space. On the flip side, some combinations are not a good match. For example, Colonial American art would not fit well in a tranquil Asian Zen-inspired space. When these differences occur, you decide if it is necessary to confront it or to simply figure out what you can do to make it work.

The Compromise

Custom framers are accustomed to choosing profiles to match the style of the art being framed. When that style will not look flattering in the room, consider your options. A frame can actually become a bridge that serves as a tran-



Here is a situation where the art is smaller than would be ideal for the space. If the customer doesn't want to look for a larger piece that would fit better, the alternative is to help make the framed art look more important in the space. In addition to the 4" wide scoop frame that offers strong visual presence, a linen liner was added.

sition between the contradictory elements. One example is in placing abstract art in a traditional space. There may be a traditional ornate frame that mimics shapes or patterns in the art that would help the opposing style of the art look more appropriate in the room. A more traditional landscape can be framed in a soft contemporary moulding that may help it relate better to a modern space.

Challenge 3

The Art Is Too Large for Its Space

When you ask your customers where they intend to hang their art, you may find that it will be crowded into a space. You can tactfully suggest finding an alternate location for the art, allowing you to create an ideal frame design and give it the proper space to look its best. If your customer is not open to that idea, compromise is in order.

The Compromise

If the art is an open edition print (of no significant value) determine if it can be cropped without losing its integrity. Let's say it is a still life centered on a blank background. You may not lose any integrity by reducing the size or simply covering part of it with a mat. If the art is original (or otherwise valuable) look for frame design options using narrow mouldings with more depth. They will allow you to gain a sense of scale or visual weight without outgrowing the available space.

Challenge 4

The Art Is Too Small for Its Space

Your customer informs you that she wants to display a small piece of art on a large, prominent wall space. Being

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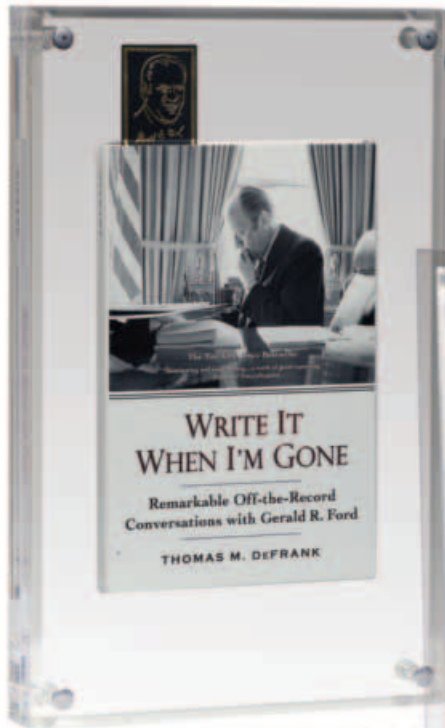
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an advocate for your customer, you may want to suggest that the small size of the art doesn't relate well to the available space. You can recommend finding a larger piece of art for that particular wall or ask if there is another wall space where the small piece of art will fit better. If she is determined to hang the art there, then compromise.

The Compromise

Use wider mat borders, liners, or frames to increase the overall size of the piece to better fit the space. Even if it still is not the ideal size, you will give the art more presence on the wall. To grow the overall size significantly, you may need to do several things. If you just add a few inches to the mat, the art may simply look like it is drowning in a mat. If you only add a wide moulding, it may appear to confine or crowd the art. The key to successfully growing a frame design usually relies on the relationship of all the different components. You may also need to add components. For example, instead of showing a double or triple mat, show four layers. You can create a faux French mat, giving the impression of a panel with lines on either side of it. This will break up the surface space of the mat border so you can use a wider border more effectively. Your success in achieving wider mat borders will also enable you to use a wider frame without crowding the art. Another alternative is to add one or more other pieces of art to create a grouping. This will still allow your customer to do exactly what she wants to do, but you are helping her make it happen in a more polished way.

Challenge 5

Your Design Concept Is Too Expensive

It's always a smart idea to show your customers your best design concepts. Let them decide whether or not they can afford the designs you suggest. When they say no, look for an alternative to bring the price down to their budgets without losing the integrity or essence of the design. Even if the conversation starts with the customer saying, "I don't want to spend much," your idea of not much may be very different from what that customer is thinking. Showing a design you think fits the bill may be way too minimal in appearance compared to what the customer wants. If you want to acknowledge that you heard the customer's concerns, you can say, "Let's agree on a frame design you think looks great and if it happens to be over your budget, we will look for an alternative."

The Compromise

First, check to see if you are close to a point where a slight decrease in the mat borders would take you into a smaller glass size as well as reduce the united inches of the other components. If you can reduce a mat border by $\frac{1}{2}$ " or $\frac{3}{4}$ " and still use the desired frame, it may be the best way to maintain the desired look.

If you have sold Museum Glass, you can always back down to other conservation glazing products without affecting the proportions you determined would look best. If you chose a fabric mat, you can also switch to a rag mat to bring down the price. If you have to alter the moulding, look for one with similar characteristics. Your choice will usually be to reduce width because a slightly narrower profile may cost less or you can reduce quality. One of those compromises may be more appropriate than the other, depending on the art. For example, if you are framing a very special original piece, sacrificing width may be smarter than sacrificing quality.

Review

Always try to remove your taste from the design process with customers unless they ask for that. When you design objectively, using logic, you will find that some issues are not important enough to worry about. You can simply show frame designs that help overcome design issues and make a design work.

When you definitely see a problem that needs to be addressed, try to offer a workable solution to help your customers get what they want. Also realize that people come to you for your help and your expertise. If you stay quiet because you don't want to hurt someone's feelings, that person may end up not liking the result and may be unsatisfied with you. Speak up when there is something to say that helps a customer. If customers choose to not follow your advice, that is their choice.

The most important thing to remember is that there are numerous ways to frame any piece of art. Keep an open mind about helping your customers find the best possible look that suits their tastes and styles. Satisfied customers are more likely to become loyal customers, and that is going to help you build a successful business. ■

Greg Perkins, CPF is in his 39th year in the framing industry. Starting out as a retailer, he has been with Larson-Juhl for the past 20 years. He holds the position of Customer Programs Manager. In addition, he is an author, contributing editor, industry educator and an artist.